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# From underground to mainstream

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Female characters in the feature  
films of Li Yu

Carla Pekander  
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Area and Cultural Studies  
Faculty of Arts  
University of Helsinki  
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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract <p>Tarkastelen tutkielmassani Li Yun kuuden eri elokuvan naishahmoja psykoanalyysin ja diskurssianalyysin avulla. Li Yu on kiinalainen naisohjaaja, joka on aloittanut dokumenttielokuvien parissa 1990-luvulla. 2000-luvun alusta lähtien häneltä on valmistunut kuusi fiktioelokuvaa <i>Fish &amp; Elephant</i> (2001), <i>Dam Street</i> (2005), <i>Lost in Beijing</i> (2007), <i>Buddha Mountain</i> (2010), <i>Double Xposure</i> (2012) ja <i>Ever Since We Love</i> (2015). Viimeisimmät kaksi ovat kaupallisia elokuvia, aiemmat olivat itsenäisiä tuotantoja. Yhteistä näille elokuville on traaginen naiskohtalo. Samalla elokuvat jatkumona kuvaavat kiinalaisen yhteiskunnan nopeaa kehitystä.</p> <p>Tutkimuksessa käytetty metodi on kolmiosainen: 1) alustava analyysi, 2) elokuvien yksittäisten ottojen luokittelu kategorioittain, 3) perusteellinen analyysi käyttäen psykoanalyysia, tele-elokuvallista diskurssianalyysia (telecinematic discourse analysis) ja ns. mindstyle menetelmää, jossa otetaan huomioon kuvaus, puhe ja eleet.</p> <p>Yksittäisten ottojen laskeminen paljasti, että hypoteesin mukaisesti miesten osuus elokuvissa nousee kohti valtavirtaa siirryttäessä. Yllättävää oli, että myös naisten osuus kasvoi aina viidenteen elokuvaan asti, minkä jälkeen naisten osuus vasta laski huomattavasti. Kuudennen elokuvan päähenkilö on miespuolinen, mikä osaltaan selittää naisten osuuden laskua.</p> <p>Li Yun naishahmot ovat itsenäisiä ja melkein pä jääräpäisiä. Heillä on vaikea äitisuhde ja huono isäsuhde – isä on usein poissa tai väkivaltainen. Li Yun naishahmot elävät usein yhteiskunnan marginaalissa ja kamppailevat olemassa olostaan kiinalaisessa yhteiskunnassa.</p> <p>Elokuville on havaittavissa muitakin muutoksia siirryttäessä kohti valtavirtaa ja kiinalaisen yhteiskunnan vaurastuessa. Elokuvat saavat enemmän rahoitusta ja siitä seuraa se, että elokuvien hahmot ja tapahtumapaikat keskiluokkaistuvat ja standardikiina (putonghua) tulee paikallisten murteiden tilalle.</p>			
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## 1 Introduction

Area and Cultural studies have traditionally been seen as their own disciplines. For example, in the case of Asian studies, Said criticized the field for orientalism and mystifying the life and culture of distant people (Said, 1979). Before Said's *Orientalism*, the Oriental studies referred to the study of the cultures and languages in the Orient (including Middle East, India, East Asia). However, after Said, the term orientalism changed to mean the patronizing attitude of Westerners towards other cultures.

There are new intriguing terms that have resulted from globalization. During has noted that cultural studies have taken a turn for the global (During, 2005). Earlier Asian studies were utterly separate from the rest, however nowadays many writers talk about Transnational studies (Wang, 2011). Especially in the case of Chinese cinema, there are new terms such as *transnational cinema*<sup>1</sup> and *global cinema*<sup>2</sup> (Zhang 2010). Since the 2008 financial crisis also Finland has become increasingly interested in transnational coproductions, which can be seen for example in the Finnish-Chinese film *Jade Warrior*, directed by AJ Annila (Bacon, 2016, p.190). The growing future possibilities in Finnish-Chinese cooperation have inspired this thesis.

Li Yu is not very well known in the mainstream, but she is a Chinese female director whose film *Dam Street* received the Jury Prize at Venice Film Festival. Li Yu's debut feature *Fish and Elephant* can be considered the first lesbian film made in mainland China. In her films, she portrays the rough life of women in a documentary inspired approach in contrast to Jia Zhangke who portrays the "everyman" and

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<sup>1</sup> Transnational is preferred as a term over international, because it blurs the lines between nation, gender and race according to Grewal and Kaplan (Wang, 2011, p.13). The roots of transnational cinema are in feminist film theory that has been developing psychoanalysis in film studies following Mayne and Mulvey since the 1970s (Wang, 2011, p.3-5). "Transnational" is better term for research in identity, nationhood and gender, because it is not tied to any specific political border or state and is more flexible. "Transnational" also allows for being in the margin, which is an important theme when looking at Li Yu's feature films' female characters who are all somehow living in the margins of society.

<sup>2</sup> Global cinema is similar to transnational cinema. However, the roots of this term are different – global cinema comes from the international feminism (feeling of sisterhood, but recognizing states) and global feminism (all women the same regardless of where they are from) (Wang, 2011, p.13). Global cinema is sometimes used, similarly to transnational cinema, as another term to describe "world cinema".

“everywoman” that all Chinese can relate to (Berry, 2009, p.123). Li Yu’s characters are the opposite – they are unique and unconventional and lead lives in the margins of society. They are people everyone might have run into on the street, yet know nothing about their reality.

Li Yu started directing from documentaries, and her three earliest films were all documentaries (*Sisters* 1996, *Stay and Hope* 1997, *Honor and Dreams* 1998). In China, documentaries are often the way directors can break through. These documentaries probably helped her develop a cinéma vérité style that is visible in her feature films. It would be interesting to research the origins of Li Yu’s style, however, to maintain a manageable scope in this thesis, I have decided to focus on her feature films from the period of 2001 to 2015.

Previous research on Li Yu has been mostly done in Chinese. However, there are some also in English. It is possible to find Chinese peer-reviewed articles, Master’s theses, film reviews, and news articles. In Chinese, there are analyses of all six films and some of the female characters from a different perspective than in this thesis. In English, the available literature focuses on the first three films *Fish and Elephant* (2001), *Dam Street* (2005), *Lost in Beijing* (2007).

*Chinese Women’s Cinema* is the first English language collection on female filmmakers from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the overseas Chinese diaspora (Wang, 2011). The introduction summarizes the developments in research up to 2011 when it was published and is very helpful for a quick overview. In this collection, Cui (2011) analyzed *Fish and Elephant* (2001), *Dam Street* (2005) and *Lost in Beijing* (2007) from a psychoanalytic angle, focusing on the female body and sexuality. Cui (2011, p.230) concluded that due to globalization female filmmaking should not be as looked at as a separate phenomenon but rather something that is in connection with the mainstream (Cui, 2011).

This thesis will focus on Li Yu’s six feature films ranging from 2001 to 2015 – *Fish and Elephant* (2001), *Dam Street* (2005), *Lost in Beijing* (2007), *Buddha Mountain* (2010), *Double Xposure* (2012), *Ever Since We Love* (2015). During this period China has gone through a process of commercialization, accelerated since the 2008 Beijing Olympics. I will look at the female characters from the psychological

perspective, focusing on their personalities and relationships with others, especially mother-daughter, daughter-father, love, and friendships.

Later this thesis will compare the films to see if Li Yu's female characters have evolved over time. The commercialization of cinema has been very fast, and it is likely to have influenced the fundamental narratives and representations.

Censorship would be an interesting topic to research. However, this thesis will focus on film analysis and the changes in Li Yu's female characters from underground to mainstream. The role of censorship has been discussed by many writers, but not much on specifically Li Yu's films, apart from Ho (2011). Li is currently working on a new entirely mainstream film, set to release in 2019 and the film features a tiger as the main character (Mtime, 2018), thus ending Li Yu's collaboration with the actress Fan Bingbing and more importantly the line of female protagonists – for this reason, and timing issues the film will not be discussed in this thesis.

### **1.1. Chinese independent film and being “local”**

Many national cinemas have been influenced by Hollywood, even if it is not unheard of to think of national cinemas as independent from Hollywood. However, there have been influences running both directions (Bordwell, 2016, p.20). Chinese independent film has not stayed intact from Hollywood influences either, but it has its own distinctive characteristics. Lately Chinese cinema, as a whole, has become more in the spotlight in film studies (Berry, 2008; Chow & Rojas, 2013; Cornelius & Smith, 2002; Lim & Ward, 2011).

The Sixth Generation of directors, including Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye, Cui Zien, Wang Chao, Zhu Wen, Liu Fendou, Han Jie, and Li Yu too, are known for their underground films that have been addressing taboo subjects and banned for not officially approved content. Jonathan Noble thinks that the emergence of these films has been in connection with the “*political currency*” and he thinks that many of these films are just fishing for attention with the help of European investment and the international film festival circuit (Noble, 2008, p.35–37). McGrath has also mentioned that some of the independent films might not have been actually “banned”, but have been advertised as such in order to gain entrance to international film festivals (McGrath, 2011, p.169).



Noble (2008) does not acknowledge that the actual censorship exists in China – as there is, in reality, a guideline for screenwriters (SARFT 2006) on topics that are not approved such as supernatural phenomena. Before filming begins the script will be assessed, and if the content is approved, the project will be given a filming permit. The film will be viewed several times during production and post-production – it is relatively easy for mainstream Chinese films to pass the screening. Braester refers to this phenomenon as the ‘*Mainstream Cinema with Chinese Characteristics*’ (Braester, 2011, p.181). However, the films that are for example documentaries or minority topics will be assessed with much more detail as the filming permit application form has separate boxes for those.

Thus, part of the Sixth Generation could be understood as ‘Independent Cinema with Chinese Characteristics’. The main characteristic of the Sixth Generation is that the filmmakers were working outside of the studio system, could not receive official funding, and had to find the financing in other ways – often abroad (Udden, 2011, p.162). The distribution of independent films is always challenging as the filmmakers have to be very active themselves. There are generally four ways to secure distribution 1) preselling with ‘name’ elements 2) film festivals and film markets 3) one-on-one deals with distributors 4) self-distribution (Balio, 2013, p.119). This meant that the Sixth Generation was more exposed to outside influences such as the French New Wave, Italian Neorealism and the Japanese ‘golden age’ from an earlier phase and had a hard time breaking into the film festival circuit – the access to the great history was a privilege and also a burden (Udden, 2011, p.158).

The recent years have seen tightening in the China Film Law, and for example, ghosts are no longer allowed – this is why the Chinese horror films usually end in discovering the main characters mental illness or a bad person dressed as a ghost. Ho (2011) on the other hand, has discussed the role of censorship in Li Yu’s filmmaking process, especially during the making of *Lost in Beijing* (2011) – and is a counter voice to Noble’s claim that censorship does not exist.

Although the independent film or underground cinema with their access to international film festivals seems more global than the Chinese domestic blockbusters, actually the topics and stories are much more local. (Lim & Ward, 2011). For example, Li Yu’s *Dam Street* is set in a small rural town in Sichuan

province. The characters in the film speak the Sichuan dialect, instead of the official Putonghua (Mandarin) used in mainstream cinema. In Sichuan, the local language is South Western Mandarin which is significantly different in tones, vocabulary, and grammar compared to Standard Mandarin (Putonghua) (Li, 1973).

Chinese independent cinema has since the early 1990s been influenced by “documentary style” filmmaking (Zhang, 2010, p.38). At the same time in experimental video arts, there has been growing popularity for combining film and the performative, such as Wu Wenguang’s *Diary: Snow, Nov.21, 1998* (Zhang, 2010, p.38). It is not always easy to tell whether or not the film is fact or fiction as the form can confuse the unaccustomed viewer, especially in Jia Zhangke’s films (Chow, 2016, p.199).

The stories in Chinese independent cinema feel very ‘realistic’ in their aesthetics, as most of the directors started with documentary filmmaking and spent a long time observing the lives of lower classes and the disadvantaged. Li Yu had directed three documentaries before she started directing feature films. However, I have decided to focus on her feature films.

The portrayal of China in the independent film could be described as very ‘raw’. The ‘reality effect’ meaning the relationship between fictional representations and the world is often referred to as the concept of mimesis (Smith, 1995, p.53). The director wants to tell stories that most people can relate to – especially in the countryside many people know someone or heard of someone having an abortion. The point is not only to shock, but rather to tell the stories that are not being told otherwise. For example, in Jia Zhangke’s films, the ‘realism’ is more about the stylistic choices, as the films are made to look like documentaries (Chow, 2016, p.198).

Chinese independent cinema is significant because it offers alternative storytelling. Chinese independent film can talk about LGTB<sup>3</sup>, whereas the mainstream cannot – although there are some slow changes and advances within the mainstream side, as they have realized there is a market for LGBT films. Li Yu’s *Fish and Elephant* (2001) was China’s first lesbian film, and it helped to start the LGBT film festival scene in China.

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<sup>3</sup> LGBT means Lesbian, Gay, Bi and Transgender.

Chinese independent film is also more open to embrace different local dialects and cultures, which enriches the Chinese cinema – instead of just homogenous official Mandarin speaking actors – we are offered a window to the regional. Regional and local are indeed keywords for Chinese independent cinema: the films were shot in distant locations with much less supervision, and they aim to provide a glimpse to a particular region – while domestic blockbusters aim to portray “One China”.<sup>4</sup>

However, the future of Chinese independent cinema is uncertain. One reason could be the tightening of control regarding filmmaking and the difficulty of acquiring the financing to make a feature film. Increasingly limited resources might turn some filmmakers into the mainstream. At the same time, there is an increasing amount of financing for mainstream film industry, especially from Wanda Pictures and Alibaba Pictures and possibility of Hollywood collaborations.

Another factor to take into account is the fact that China is changing. As China has gained wealth, it now has the world’s largest middle class (Zhang, Wan & Khor, 2011). The new generations that have lived in middle-class families are not so interested in the suffering of the poor and prefer to watch films on contemporary issues such as university love, plastic surgery and developing a successful career. According to Chinese media, there are those born in the 1980s (80后) who are still somewhat concerned with traditional values and those born in the 1990s (90后) who have lived through the rapid change and have been active on the Internet since their teens. In Western media, these are often referred to as Generation X and Millennials (sometimes Generation Y, in Chinese Y世代).

## **1.2. Being on the margins**

China has had and still continues to have many female directors. However, they are often not represented in the mainstream. Most films that are blockbusters are directed by men. Films directed by women and films about women tend to be pushed towards the margins (Xu, 2017). This gender imbalance is not only a Chinese issue but rather a global issue – the film industry is still dominated by men, although the number of

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<sup>4</sup> “One China” Principle means currently how the PRC sees Taiwan as part of it, and does not recognise it as ROC (Tseng 2016). Basically “One China” can also mean an unified China.

women in leading positions, working as directors, screenwriters, and producers, is slowly increasing.

Since the 1990s marginality has been a keyword for Chinese independent cinema (Zhang, 2010, p.103). Chinese independent film tends to focus on people on the margins, such as immigrant workers, LGBT and has a favoring of women as main characters. The women filmmakers in China face many challenges as women's films are not ideologically accepted (Cui, 2011, p.214). The women's or the feminist film challenges the patriarchal hierarchy and Confucian principles that women should first and foremost be "*obedient wives and good mothers*", the so-called *xiangqi liangmu* (Stevens, 2003).

It is not only the characters that are in the margins but the whole independent film's 'space of production' is also in the margins. Marginality is part of the "*independent film truth*" (Zhang, 2010, p. 44). Cui (2011) has analyzed Li Yu's film trilogy *Fish and Elephant* (2001), *Dam Street* (2005) and *Lost in Beijing* (2007) especially from the spatial perspective. *Dam Street* has a "*voyeuristic male gaze*" (Cui, 2011, p.223) that Laura Mulvey has written more about in her theory of psychoanalysis and cinema (Mulvey, 1989; Mulvey, 1990). In the 1980s the Chinese films saw growth in female protagonists but not necessarily a shift in "*gaze*" (Cornelius & Smith, 2002, p.72).

Cui sees Li Yu's trilogy as an example of how women in Chinese cinema keep working against the current and making films about women in a male-dominated industry (Cui, 2011, p. 229). Li Yu, the director of the films, does not identify herself as a feminist or a feminist filmmaker but instead sees making films about women something personally important to her – which Cui finds perplexing (Cui, 2011, p.230).

However, considering the negative connotations many people in the mainstream have with loaded words such as "feminist" or "feminism", it seems quite normal that Li Yu would say something like that. As a director and filmmaker, she is interested in finding financing for her future films and does not want to risk her future by being labelled. Li Yu sees herself as a woman director and wants to make films about women because she feels that as a female she can show women's stories that do not

get told as often. Zhang Yimou has been an inspiration for Li Yu too – many of his films have female protagonists although he is a male director (The Bund, 2007).

Women directors are more common in the West than elsewhere. However there are many also in the developing countries, and some refer to them as '*Third World Women Directors*' (Quart, 1989). A common feature in the films from India and China is that the films portray women on the margins of society (Quart, 1989, p.241). Even though the films are set in entirely different parts of the world, the stories have universal qualities that also the Western woman spectator can recognize (Quart, 1989, p.242).

Women around the world have families and friends, women might have difficulties finding a job and trying to balance work and personal life – there are many things that only women experience and men cannot understand, but women can. Perhaps a better term for these women directors, Quart refers to, could be transnational directors – meaning that the directors are interested in stories regardless of gender, identity and nationhood. As many of the films can be categorized as art films, the storytelling that follows this style can also be understood as '*transnational auteurism*' (Czyzydlo, 2002).

### **1.3. Previous research on Li Yu**

Li Yu's three earlier films *Fish & Elephant*, *Dam Street* and *Lost in Beijing* have been analyzed in English (Cui, 2011) and Chinese (Cao, 2014; Fang, 2008). There is plenty of research on different aspects, such as psychoanalysis (Tian, 2014), the characters' relationships (Duan 2011) and more general film analysis (Chang, 2012; Feng, 2013; Li, 2008; Li, 2015; Qi, 2013; Zhu, 2011; Yan, 2012; Yu, 2014;). The three later films *Buddha Mountain*, *Double Xposure* and *Ever Since We Love* have been analyzed less and there is no English sources for them yet, only Chinese (Bai, 2015; Sun, 2012; Wang, 2015).

Cao (2014) divided the relationships of the female characters into three categories: 1) females as daughters, 2) females as mothers and 3) females as lovers (Cao, 2014). These categories were the helpful starting point for the film *Fish & Elephant*, but can also work with the other films too. Psychoanalysis of the characters was used by Cui (2011) and Tian (2014), thus providing a basis for the analysis in this thesis. Cui

points out how the rebellious girl in *Lost in Beijing* is punished – she becomes a prostitute in the end (Cui, 2014, p. 225). Li Yu's female characters live in a world where women have to obey rules, or they will end up selling their body (Cui, 2014).

## 2 Theoretical framework

The film analysis has a variety of methodological approaches. Basic analytical frameworks mentioned include, among other things, structuralism, semiotics, and hermeneutics. Their application and deficiencies are discussed in for example *Concepts in Film Theory* (Andrew, 1984) and *A Theoretical Defence of Film Theory and Criticism* (Miller, 1999). Semiotics focused too much on the cinematic codes, an approach that has been contested (Andrew, 1984, p.56). Structuralism has focused on the abstract, “*purely formal mechanisms of stories*” such as linguistics (Andrew, 1984, p.65). Hermeneutics needs to consider how to assess different conflicting interpretations (Baracco, 2017).

It is rather new to use psychoanalysis to study film (Kaplan, 1990). Psychoanalysis gained a foothold from the 1970s because it could be used as a way to explain why societies were structured in ways that had some people (women or working class) as subservient to another (men or the bourgeoisie) (Rushton & Bettinson, 2010, p.71). The usefulness of psychoanalysis lies in how it can be used to explain a character's personality and behavior. Psychoanalysis can also help in understanding their upbringing. Similarly to real people, sometimes fictional characters may have severe mental pain or mental disorders. Camera movements and editing can imitate an individual's experience of trauma (Dudai, 2014, p.47) and thus provide a small window for the audience into a character's life.

However, psychoanalysis has both its pros and cons. Psychoanalysis has been criticized for being too limited to studying the auteur or the artist's psyche or studying cultural obsessions – when it should be focusing on the art itself (Andrew, 1984). There are also other problems with psychoanalysis such as the consensus problem where different analysts are unable to reach the same results (Lynch, 2014). Cognitive and evolutionary psychology has become more reliable than psychoanalysis (Ouweneel, 2012, p.3). However, psychoanalysis can be helpful when looking at the relationships between characters, and it has been used before for

analyzing Li Yu's films (Tian, 2014; Cui, 2011). It is important to remember the limitations of psychoanalysis and use it with caution.

## **2.1 The research outline**

The research questions are as follows:

1. How are the main female characters portrayed in Li Yu's feature films?
2. How are the relationships between the main female characters and other male and female characters in the films?
3. Do these representations change over time? If so, how and why?

This thesis focuses on the female protagonists and their relationships to men and women. The relationships between characters are interesting because the interactions between people shape their identities. In this thesis, qualitative approaches are used to analyze the sample – six female main characters from Li Yu's six feature films.

## **2.2 Theory and methodology**

This thesis has been impacted by “*keyhole effect*” by Christian Metz (1991) and Laura Mulvey's *Visual pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Mulvey, 1989). Psychoanalysis originates from Freud's theory; however, it is important to point out that in film studies psychoanalysis means analyzing sexuality, personality, and relationships of fictional characters. The concepts of the ‘narrator’ and ‘spectator’ are crucial in understanding how film narrative works. Smith has written on the relationship of the character and spectator using the framework of “*structure of sympathy*” which consists of the three layers: recognition, alignment, and allegiance (Smith, 1995, p.81).

In film theory, “psychoanalysis and cinema” is often used to specify the difference. Psychoanalysis in psychology and film studies are different methods. In film studies the researcher is not in communication with the subjects and is analyzing fictional characters. This thesis is influenced by psychoanalysis theory in the film that originates from Laura Mulvey (1989; 1990) and Christian Metz (1991). The concept of psychoanalysis in film theory has been explained by Andrew and *Concepts in*

*Film Theory* (Andrew, 1984) is key to the origins of the framework of this thesis. However, psychoanalysis alone is not sufficient to explain the female characters and their relationships.

Jill Soloway discussed in her keynote speech at Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) the concept of “*female gaze*” as not a direct counterpart for Mulvey’s “male gaze” – according to Soloway the “*female gaze*” is not sexualized, but rather it is a female filmmaker’s way to portray the world how women see it (Soloway, 2016). Xu has written about the “*female consciousness*” (Xu, 2017) in Li Yu’s films and sees Li Yu as capable of directing both female and also a male point of view (*Ever Since We Love*). Xu’s “*female consciousness*” is similar to how Soloway describes “*female gaze*” as being able to see what usually is not shown in films (such as LGBT) and depict it with many layers, not stereotypically. Bai (2015) sees *Ever Since We Love* as having a *double gaze*, as the film has both male and female protagonists.

Discourse analysis is another commonly used method. Foucault is one of the significant influencers in seeing the film as a text (Hall, 2013). What is important to remember is not so much the question of personal taste, but instead trying to analyze films critically and trying to understand “*what is being said about women here, who is speaking and, for whom*” (Kaplan, 1990, p.13). Thus, the question of whether or not the academic agrees or not with the representation is irrelevant as individual tastes are different – maybe not all women are like Li Yu’s female characters, but that is not the point. ‘Realistic’ is always subjective (Kaplan, 1990) and different spectators have different interpretations.

As this thesis aims to assess the relationships between the characters, it seems natural to choose discourse analysis. Chatman has described how structuralist theory is based on narrative consisting of story and discourse (Chatman, 1978, p.19). “*Story is the content of the narrative expression, while discourse is the form of that expression*” (Chatman, 1978, p.24). Traditional literary analysis has been criticized for treating fictional characters as real people (Bacon, 2000, p.184), which is why this thesis treats fictional characters as fictional characters.

This thesis has also been influenced by telecinematic discourse analysis (Bednarek, Piazza & Rossi, 2011), especially the multimodal analysis of “*mind style*” (Montoro,



2011). Montoro's "cinematic mind style indicators" (Montoro, 2011,p.81) refers to how the cinematic techniques such as camera angles, camera movement, gestures are used to convey a film character's state of mind.

The relationships between film characters can be analyzed from their conversation, non-verbal cues, and the frequency of shared screen time (Bubel, 2011, p.228). These non-verbal cues can be facial expressions or gestures such as hugging. Bubel thinks the viewer can see whether or not two characters are friends from how they interact with each other and even recognize friendship through talk (Bubel 2011, p.230). Bubel's points are relevant to this thesis as the female characters will be analyzed in relation to other women and men.

It has been found in colour psychology that colours can have different connotations (Whitfield & Wiltshire, 1990). In different countries colours have different meanings. In the West the colour red is associated with blood and violence, as well as love. Whereas, in China the colour red has only positive connotations and is considered a lucky colour. In cinema, the selection of colours the actors use can be used to portray the nature of the character (Wu & Lin, 2016).

The method adopted in this thesis is applied film analysis complemented by telecinematic discourse analysis. First the films were watched repeatedly and notes were made on all the cinematic qualities, such as characters, plot, conversation, locations (space), time (day/night), setting (contemporary/historical), light and shadow, camera movement, positions, and angles, shot size and composition , editing and rhythm, sound, music, colors and symbolism. Based on the initial discoveries, it was decided that the characters would be the main focus for further analysis.

In the second stage, following Bubel (2011), the films were watched again, and the number of times female characters and male characters appeared were counted and assigned into different categories.

The categories used were:

- 1) only one female character,
- 2) only one male character,
- 3) two or more females only,
- 4) two or more males only,

- 5) one male and one female,
- 6) one female and two or more males,
- 7) several males and females in the same shot.

Based on this method of scrutiny the hypothesis is formulated that the amount of shots with males increases towards films becoming mainstream.

In the final stage, the relationships between female characters and other characters were analyzed using psychoanalysis, telecinematic discourse analysis (Bubel, 2011), and “*mind style*” approach (Montoro, 2011). The analysis consists of significant scenes that show the main female characters’ relationships to other characters, men, and women respectively, through what they say and visual cues including gestures and camera positions.

This applied approach was deemed to provide more information on the female characters and their relationships with men and women. Cui (2011) already used psychoanalysis to analyze the three earlier films *Fish & Elephant*, *Dam Street* and *Lost in Beijing*. However, using psychoanalysis only has its limitations, as already noted.

Cao has discussed the relationships of the female characters in *Fish & Elephant* and splits the female characters’ relationships into three categories: 1) females as daughters, 2) females as mothers and 3) females as lovers (Cao, 2014). These three categories can also be used when looking at the other films as they summarize Li Yu’s female characters’ relationships pretty well: Liu Pingguo (*Lost in Beijing*) and Yun (*Dam Street*) are both mothers, Qun (*Fish&Elephant*) and Yun (*Dam Street*) are daughters, Qun (*Fish&Elephant*) and Song Qi (*Double Xposure*) are lovers. Thus, the category ‘females as lovers’ could include both heterosexual and lesbian relationships in Li Yu’s films.

As using only psychoanalysis can be too limiting, this thesis adopts an applied approach together with telecinematic discourse analysis (Bubel, 2011) and “*mind style*” approach (Montoro, 2011). Triangulation can have its pros and cons too - there will be possibility to gain more information, but it could also be irrelevant information (Flick 2004). With an applied approach, psychoanalysis can be used to look at the relationships between characters without falling into the trap of being too

theoretical. Telecinematic discourse analysis – including counting all the shots – can help to see if there is a pattern of growth in the appearances of males and females. It provides data that would otherwise not exist if psychoanalysis was used alone. “Mind style” helps in analyzing individual scenes and provides more detailed information on the relationships between characters.

As with any approach, there are some limitations. The biggest problem is that the characters are fictional and cannot be analyzed outside of their context (the film). It is important to remember that there is no single way to understand the characters and there is always the potential for different interpretations. However, with transparency, it should be possible for another researcher to replicate the method and come to the same conclusions. Thus, the applied approach used in this thesis is to be considered valid.

### **2.3 Data collection**

The data of this thesis consists of primary sources (films) and literature. The literature has been available in the library of University of Helsinki and the Finnish National Audiovisual Institute (KAVI). National Audiovisual Institute has a large collection of film literature, and they have a film archive where films can be viewed. Their collection on East Asian cinema is extremely useful for researching Chinese cinema.

As there are not many official sources on independent filmmakers, most information on the films and any problems the filmmakers might have had in submitting to film festivals come from media such as news and articles. Primary sources on Li Yu include inter alia interviews online, information on the director on Baike<sup>5</sup>, IMDB<sup>6</sup> and the Laurel Films website<sup>7</sup>.

In China the collection of box office data is done mostly by companies such as Meituan and the data has to be critically looked at as it is not open how they collect their data.<sup>8</sup> In the case of Li Yu, the exact numbers are slightly irrelevant as most of

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<sup>5</sup> Baike, Li Yu: <http://www.baike.baidu.com/item/李玉/3766735>

<sup>6</sup> IMDB, Li Yu: [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1165953/?ref=tt\\_ov\\_dr](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1165953/?ref=tt_ov_dr)

<sup>7</sup> Laurel Films. <http://laurelfilms.com/en/about/#section1>

<sup>8</sup> Meituan, Box office data on director Li Yu: [www.piaofang.meituan.com/search?key=李玉](http://www.piaofang.meituan.com/search?key=李玉)

her films had only a limited release in overseas film festivals and have later been distributed unofficially hand-to-hand. It is more interesting to look at changes in portrayals of women during the process of moving from underground to mainstream.

For this thesis the banned films – the earlier four - have been acquired from outside China and gaining access to the films was the most challenging part of the process. *Double Xposure* (2012) and *Ever Since We Love* (2015) were easy to access as they have been officially approved by the SARFT<sup>9</sup> and they are available to view on Chinese streaming site Youku.<sup>10</sup> *Double Xposure* has 5 million views and *Ever Since We Love* has 83.66 million views on Youku as of 3 Feb 2018.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.4 Researching China in the West – potential for bias?

There are possible biases in researching China in the West. *Transnational studies* is more of an Anglo-American tradition, which means most of the literature is in the English language. However, Berry has looked at the situation of transnational from a Chinese perspective (Berry, 2010).

Most research in *Transnational studies* is on films from mainland China. The portrayal of Chinese in American films is usually most significantly marked by “otherness” – either by religion or sexuality (Greene, 2014, p.17). The Chinese characters are often heavily stereotyped, for example, the good Chinese men are pure, whereas the bad men are perverted and lust for white women (Greene, 2014, p.19). Chinese women’s portrayal is also split into two main paths: the dragon ladies and the gullible, suicidal women abandoned by their Western lovers (Greene, 2014, p.19).

As Greene (2014) has pointed out the Western portrayal of Chinese in films tends to be negative, which is why it is important to include Chinese interpretations of Li Yu’s female characters. Chinese researchers see Li Yu’s characters as empowering women and “giving a voice to the invisible”.

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<sup>9</sup> State Administration of Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China

<sup>10</sup> Youku:

[http://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XNDY4NDYxNzYw.html?spm=a2h0k.8191407.0.0&from=s1.8-1-1.1](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNDY4NDYxNzYw.html?spm=a2h0k.8191407.0.0&from=s1.8-1-1.1)

<sup>11</sup> Youku:

[http://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XOTU4NTgyNTY0.html?spm=a2h0k.8191407.0.0&from=s1.8-1-1.1](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XOTU4NTgyNTY0.html?spm=a2h0k.8191407.0.0&from=s1.8-1-1.1)

It is interesting to be able to compare China from a Chinese perspective and China from a Western perspective, although this thesis will be focusing on Li Yu's films and the female perspective. In an increasingly globalized world, where "local is global" it is a more new way to see how West and China are becoming increasingly intertwined also in the film industry.

This thesis includes both English and Chinese language literature in order to maintain a neutral stance as there are some differences in researching one's own culture and a foreign culture. The aim is to analyze films using the theoretical framework described before and to take cultural differences into account – which means an applied approach.

### **3 Female characters in the feature films of Li Yu**

The sample of analysis includes six female main characters from Li Yu's six feature films. The first main character is Qun from *Fish & Elephant* (2001), and she will be analyzed in relation with other women and men in the film – the female characters include her mother, her girlfriend and her ex-girlfriend, the male characters include Qun's cousin, her ex-girlfriend's new boyfriend, and her blind dates. The second main character is from *Dam Street* (2005), the supporting female characters include her mother, the adoptive mother of her son and the male characters include her son, her teenage crush, her fiancée and her boss. The third protagonist is Liu Pingguo from *Lost in Beijing* (2007). The fourth protagonist is Nan Feng from *Buddha Mountain* (2010). The fifth protagonist is Song Qi from *Double Exposure* (2012). The sixth main female character is Liu Qing from *Ever Since We Love* (2015).

#### **3.1 Fish & Elephant**

As mentioned earlier, *Fish and Elephant* (2001) broke new ground in Chinese cinema by being the first film about lesbians. There might be a connection with the globalization and the growing interest in LGBT – however, it seems likely that Li Yu could have encountered some of the marginalized groups during her work as a documentary director. The timing of *Fishing and Elephant* (2001) is to be considered early as it was released before the big mainstream wave of LGBT films emerged by the release of *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). *Lanyu* (2001), directed by Stanley Kwan,

was released the same year as *Fish and Elephant* (2011), but it was about gay men. However, the predecessor of both *Lanyu* (2001) and *Fish and Elephant* (2001) in Chinese cinema would be *East Palace, West Palace* (1996), directed by Zhang Juan. It is considered the first film with homosexual themes in Chinese cinema (Variety 1997).<sup>12</sup>

### 3.1.1 The main female character

In *Fish & Elephant*, the main character Qun is a ‘leftover woman’ by choice. ‘Leftover women’ refers to women who postpone marriage past the age of about thirty (Gaetano, 2014). She works in the zoo taking care of elephants and her girlfriend Ling keeps an aquarium with goldfish, thus making the film’s English title *Fish & Elephant* a reference to them both. The aquarium in the girls’ room becomes a symbol of their relationship or love. When everything is well between them, they feed the fish together and the fish witness their intimate moments. However, when it is discovered that the main character has been seeing her ex-girlfriend secretly, all the fish die.

Her mother and cousin arrange her dates with potential husband candidates, but she is very frank that she likes women. For her, it is just normal, and she is open about her preferences. However, she soon becomes entangled in a love triangle with her current girlfriend Ling and ex-girlfriend Wu Junjun from years ago. The new girlfriend and the ex both date men too – that enables them to keep up the appearances and “save face”, leaving Qun feeling vulnerable and taken advantage of. Qun is open about her sexuality, whereas her partners are not.

Queer love in film and television has generally become more researched (Demory & Pullen, 2013). Young has written about the concept of “*love without future*” in the film *The Living End* (1992) which features two gay men and their obsession with romantic love (Young, 2013). In *Fish & Elephant* (2001) it is possible to notice a similar theme of the “love without future”. The main character Qun is a hopeless romantic and dreams of love, yet the reality is harsh. Her lovers see no future with her, and her mother does not see a future without marriage and a child. The main

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<sup>12</sup> Variety (1997). *East Palace, West Palace*. May 18, 1997. Available at: <http://variety.com/1997/film/reviews/east-palace-west-palace-1117329796/>

character's desires are only occasionally satisfied, and she craves for more attention from women. She rejects the heterosexual love several times of which the most symbolic is the scene where her girlfriend Ling refuses to sell clothes to a heterosexual couple.

### **3.1.2 The main character's relationship with women**

Cao's first category is females as daughters (Cao, 2014). Qun's most significant relationship is with her mother. Her mother keeps trying to introduce potential boyfriends to Qun and setting her up on blind dates. The meetings always fail, because Qun tells her dates she is not interested in men. After the first failed date in the film, Qun is calling her mother from a public phone. The camera is positioned stationarily behind her, in a slight left angle and she is in middle of the frame – however, her face is not visible as it is in the booth's shadow. Qun is talking to her mother on the phone.

Qun: Sorry mom, he doesn't like me. He just wants to be friends.

Mother: You've seen so many men already. I don't believe the right one isn't out there.

Qun: It's no use to rush this, just take it easy! Don't worry Mom!

Mother: What do you mean by "just take it easy"? How can I take it easy if you are still single?

Qun: Mom, I think it's going to rain. I've got to go see my elephant.

There is no sign of rain; it seems like an excuse for trying to stop the conversation.

Mother: I'm the one that brought you up. You should know what I mean. One should get married and have a baby.

Qun: As long as I'm not broke, I'll stay single. All you know is worrying. If my brother didn't die of a car accident, you wouldn't push me like this. Sorry mom.

Mother: It's been four years. My troubles have all been predestined.

Qun: Mom, take care.

Qun hangs up. The camera has changed position to the side and includes some elderly people sitting on benches looking in Qun's direction as she hangs up the phone and walks away. The point of view is outsiders', and it emphasizes Qun's marginality in the society. The other characters are wearing white, blue and gray clothes that blend into the surroundings, while Qun is wearing bright red – emphasizing that she stands out in the crowd.

### 3.1.3 The main character's relationship with men

In *Fish & Elephant* Cao's third category 'females as lovers' does not really have males as the love relationships in the film are generally female-female. However, Ling has a boyfriend before meeting Qun, and her relationship with her boyfriend is an example of male-female love in the film. Qun's ex-girlfriend Wu Junjun also dates men, and Qun goes on blind dates with husband candidates to please her anxious mother who would like to see her get married. The characters are forced into heterosexuality by their family and environment.

*Fish & Elephant* begins with the introduction to the main character and her male cousin.<sup>13</sup> The cousin is shown as passively sitting at a table smoking alone until Qun arrives. He is wearing a black shirt, and Qun is wearing a bright red shirt – the colors of their shirts emphasize their mood to the audience.

Cousin: I've been waiting a long time for you (annoyed voice and expression)

Qun: So what, he's not here yet.

Cousin: How could you know?

The main character Qun is not happy to meet with her cousin who is trying to introduce her to a possible husband candidate. While the two are arguing, the main character takes out a cigarette – in mainland China, especially in smaller cities women are not supposed to smoke as smoking is considered 'manly' or 'masculine' behavior. The main character does not see anything wrong with her behavior and is

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<sup>13</sup> *Fish & Elephant* (2001). Sequence from 00:00:50 - 00:02:50.



about to light her cigarette. Cousin grabs the cigarette from her while explaining how she should be married and have children by now.

Qun: Why are you smoking? You divorced your wife, right?

Cousin: I did, but I married her in the first place.

The main character Qun says nothing and helps him light the cigarette. The cousin goes on about how she needs to get a grip on herself and get married already.

Qun: Look haven't I told you? I have no interest in men.

Cousin: No interest in men, then what are you interested in? I think something's wrong with you. Want me to find you a therapist?

Qun is biting her lip and fidgeting with the cup. The cousin goes on about how she cannot keep living with her mother's as her mother will not be around forever, and Qun needs to sacrifice her own interests and have a 'normal' life. The cousin is embarrassed about Qun and tries to convince her to change.

Cousin: It will become a joke if it's known. You might not care what others say, but your mother cares.

Most of the talking in this scene is by the male cousin, while Qun quietly listens what he has to say. She seems to have heard it many times before and has no energy to argue about the same thing over and over again. The cousin is bringing a message on behalf of her mother, which shows that Qun and her mother might not be close enough to have this conversation.

Another interpretation is that Qun and her mother already have a complicated relationship since she has openly expressed she does not want to get married. In Chinese society, marriage is the expected norm, and the attitude towards it is generally more serious (apart from the big cities). Marriage is much more a family matter than in the West and parents will pressure their children to get married in varying degrees (Croll, 1981).

In the next scene, the husband candidate, Qun and her cousin are at the table.<sup>14</sup> Cousin has passed out. Qun and the newly introduced man are drinking heavily.

Candidate 1: Cheers again!

Both Candidate 1 and Qun: One who drifts along in the society is sure to get chopped. (chanting)

Candidate 1 is standing, and Qun is sitting during the first verse. She gets up, and both are standing while they continue their chanting while pouring more alcohol.

Both Candidate 1 and Qun: One chop kills you, eight chops kill you. (chanting) Six chops kill you; seven chops kill you. Nine chops kill you, and your family gets chopped to death.

Qun's voice fades during the chanting of the last sentence, and she turns her head.

Candidate 1: Drink!

In this scene male is more dominant at first, the power relation is emphasized by having Qun first sitting. For a while, they are seen as equals, both chanting and drinking until Qun is forced back to her 'traditional gender role' or her submissive position. Qun is a better drinker than her male cousin, which shows that she is not an 'everywoman'. She does not seem embarrassed by her behavior that might seem not very feminine to bystanders. The position of the camera is outside the window looking inside the restaurant, and it shows how Qun would look like in the eyes of a stranger. There is a huge contrast compared to the first scene where she was inside the restaurant talking with her cousin, and the camera was positioned stationarily on her side, almost where Candidate 1 is standing. In the first scene, everything was more intimate, and the audience can see the 'real' Qun and try to understand her.

### 3.2 Dam Street

In *Dam Street*, there are some notable references to Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*. One of them is the scene where the main character Yun is seen performing Chinese opera. However, the scene quickly turns slightly surreal when

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<sup>14</sup> Fish & Elephant (2001). Sequence from 00:03:05 - 00:03:21.

the 80s style dancing girls are shown in the background. This scene can be seen as partly a tribute to the earlier generations of filmmakers; however, at the same time, it symbolizes a break from the tradition and the beginning of a new era. In *Farewell My Concubine* the male character Douzi often repeats the sentence “I am by nature a girl, not a boy” – in the film he says girl by mistake instead of a boy – the repetition accentuates the meaning of this sentence thus creating a sense of confused gender identity.

This confused gender identity is a common theme in all Li Yu’s films, and it is broader than just being a lesbian (*Fish & Elephant*) – in Li Yu’s films female characters are shown as being headstrong, independent and nonconformist. Basically this is the the complete opposite of how these women are expected to behave by their surrounding society. A motto that could summarize the essence of Li Yu’s female characters in reference to *Farewell My Concubine* (霸王别姬) could be “I am by nature a boy, not a girl”.

*Dam Street* includes an example of the “keyhole effect”(Metz, 1991) – the little boy spies on Yun from behind the door, providing the audience with a secret spectacle. However, Yun also spies on the boy one night from behind the window after having learned he is her son. The keyhole effect originally means film in general as providing a secret spectacle, but it can also be understood in a more practical way such as in *Dam Street*. The audience is only given a limited view inside the room from the looker’s point of view.

### **3.2.1 The main character**

The main character in *Dam Street* is Yun. The film follows her for over ten years, beginning in 1983 from her teenage pregnancy that changes her life forever when she is discovered by her teacher. At the time when the events take place, China’s strict one child policy had just been established in 1979, and it meant that women could not have children outside of marriage. Teenage pregnancy was not accepted as only women over the legal marriage age could apply for the permit of having a child. Yun and her boyfriend are shunned by the whole village and forced to drop out from high school – their futures are lost no matter what. The theme of “love without future” is present again in *Dam Street*. Yun’s mother tells Yun the baby had died, but actually

she arranged a secret adoption – perhaps partly because she foresaw this would be the only grandchild she could have.

### **3.2.2 The main character's relationship with women**

After the whole school has found out about Yun's unwanted pregnancy, she goes home, and her mother is not happy with the news at all.

Yun's mother whips Yun, and she falls down on her knees in front of his father's altar.

Yun's mother: You tell your father! Tell him what you've done!

Yun's mother whips the table. Yun is sitting on the floor.

Yun's mother: You tell him!

Yun looks at her dead father's picture. Yun's mother points to the picture.

Yun's mother: The whole school already knows!

The whole town already knows!

Yun's mother whips Yun again.

Yun's mother: You don't care about losing face, but I do!

Yun is crying and rubbing her hip that just got whipped. Yun's mother continues whipping, and Yun is crying.

Yun's mother: Shame on you! Shame on you!

Yun's mother keeps chasing her and whipping until Yun runs out of the room. Yun comes back with a pan.

Yun: What are you doing? Hit me again...I'll kill myself in front of you!

Yun's mother starts coughing. She kneels to the ground crying.

Yun was stubborn already when she is in school. Her mother's attempts to discipline her only enraged her, instead of having a real effect. Her mother realizes this and arranges for the baby to be adopted secretly – she tells Yun the baby died. Otherwise, Yun would probably want to keep the baby.

Yun does not have many female friends. Her friend Mimi spends a lot of time in a karaoke bar and has become close with the owner. One day, when Yun is sleeping, Mimi wakes her up to tell her the man asked her to marry him. Mimi is very drunk, and that makes it seem like perhaps the proposal was just drunk talk.

### **3.2.3 The main character's relationship with men**

Yun has relationships with three males in the film. First is her middle school boyfriend, second is the married man and third is her son that she only sees as a neighbor's kid -she does not know about the secret adoption. Her middle school boyfriend is sent away to work in construction sites and dies in an accident at work.

The loving relationship between friends – Yun and the little boy – becomes ruined when it is revealed that they are a mother and son (Cui, 2011, p.223). Their relationship becomes complicated by the Oedipus complex. Before the revelation, we feel that their relationship is cute – the boy is in love with her and wants to marry her. However, even the boy cannot convince Yun to stay. She runs away to Shenzhen, and her fate remains unclear, but it is hinted that prostitutes go to Shenzhen.

In her wedding, Yun gets harassed by a rich man when she is washing her hands and crying alone. She is crying because she finally got the man she waited for so long yet she does not feel happy. She often gets unwanted advances because of her reputation. First she had a teenage pregnancy and then she was a married man's mistress. When she was still the mistress, she got beaten by the man's wife and friends while performing on stage. Yun has been publicly humiliated many times.

Yun's female friend Mimi was dating a rich man, and she was supposed to marry him. Yun feels jealous that she is not married yet. However, Mimi's lover thinks she is a prostitute and says to Yun at her wedding that he could never marry Mimi because of that. The men's attitude towards "impure" women is very hostile in the film.

### 3.3 Lost in Beijing

*Lost in Beijing* was first demanded extensive cuts by censors, and even then it was banned for sexual content and portrayal of gambling. Li Yu was even banned from filmmaking for two years after the release (Reuters, 2008). From *Lost in Beijing* (2007) Li Yu began her collaboration with Fan Bingbing, who is currently a megastar and in 2016 was titled the “Fifth best-paid actress in the world” by Forbes (Forbes, 2016).

The film is much darker than the other films as it features an explicit rape scene – after which the rape victim is exploited as a surrogate mother. The storyline shows a men’s world where women have little value and those women who resist end up dead – the only way to survive is to suffer and stay quiet. The world seems like a hopeless place for women to live in, especially if they are from lower classes of society. It could be likely that this darkness was also partly a reason for banning the film.

#### 3.3.1 The main character

The main character in *Lost in Beijing* is Liu Pingguo. She and her husband An Kun are migrant workers in Beijing: Liu Pingguo works in a massage parlor, and An Kun is a window cleaner. One day she gets drunk and is raped by her boss Lin Dong – she becomes pregnant as a result, but it is not clear whether An Kun or Lin Dong is the father. Lin Dong and his sterile wife want to adopt the child and raise as their own – they even agree to pay 20 000 yuan for An Kun’s mental suffering and 100 000 yuan for the baby once the paternity has been verified. Throughout the film, Liu Pingguo just accepts her fate and lets the two men be in charge of everything. However, at the end of the film, she quietly runs away with the baby, leaving both An Kun and Lin Dong looking for her.

#### 3.3.2 The main character’s relationship with women

Mrs. Lin feels threatened by Liu Pingguo because she spends much time with Lin Dong and the baby. Even the fact that Mrs. Lin is sleeping with An Kun as revenge seems not enough to calm her nerves around Liu Pingguo. Liu Pingguo does her best to avoid conflict and is unaware of An Kun’s affair with Mrs. Lin.

Liu Pingguo moves to Lin Dong's house after giving birth to the baby. One day she is giving Mrs. Lin a foot massage.

Mrs. Lin: I can see why you are the best at Golden Basin. They were telling the truth, right?

Liu Pingguo says nothing and continues to massage Mrs. Lin's feet.

Mrs. Lin: You think if you can make a man comfortable. He will fall for you then? You are better than me on this. But I am smarter than you.

Liu Pingguo keeps silent and continues massaging.

Mrs. Lin: I know you may trick Lin Dong. But he does not dare to be tricked by you.

Liu Pingguo massages firmly.

Mrs. Lin: Because he is a man. He knows how to distinguish self-interest and love.

Liu Pingguo: Mrs. Lin, you're thinking too much (still massaging).

Mrs. Lin: I'm not thinking too much, I just care a lot. A careful driver drives for ever. You are a woman too. You need to keep a way out for yourself. Otherwise you will end up with nothing. On life's gambling table, your stake is much higher than mine.

Liu Pingguo still massages her feet and sighs loudly.

Liu Pingguo: It's done, Mrs. Lin.

Liu Pingguo stops the massage and leaves. Mrs. Lin looks her walking away and throws her book on the floor angrily.

Mrs. Lin's words foreshadow Liu Pingguo's faith – she would be left with nothing if she does not run away with the baby. An Kun took all the money to himself and did not want to share it with Liu Pingguo. If she gave the baby away too, she would have neither money nor a baby.

Liu Pingguo's other relationship with another female character is with her friend Xiaomei. At the beginning of the film, Xiaomei and Liu Pingguo, both work in the Gold Basin massage parlor. However, Xiaomei is still too innocent to allow the customers to touch her inappropriately and causes a scene which results in her being fired. Xiaomei struggles to find new work and ends up dating men, then slowly prostituting herself on the streets to survive. At the end of the film, she is found dead, and Liu Pingguo is taken to identify the remains. Xiaomei becomes an example of what happens to the women who do not play by the rules of the society.

### **3.3.3 The main character's relationship with men**

Liu Pingguo does not want to end up like Xiaomei and goes to ask for her job back after the rape. She is willing to forget it happened if only she got her old job back at the massage parlor. However, her boss Lin Dong is not willing to take her back and offers her money to get rid of her. Lin Dong does not admit it was rape, but Liu Pingguo keeps insisting it was without her consent.

Later when it is found out that Liu Pingguo is pregnant and Lin Dong could be the father, he lets her work in the massage parlor again. Liu Pingguo's relationship with Lin Dong is about business, although after the baby is born, Liu Pingguo would like to change An Kun to Lin Dong in order to continue living comfortably. However, Lin Dong and Mrs. Lin have signed an agreement that if he breaks up with her to be with Liu Pingguo, she will get half of all his assets – and that is why Lin Dong does not accept Liu Pingguo's advances on him.

Liu Pingguo and her husband An Kun are still relatively close after the rape. When they are sitting and looking down on the Forbidden City, they are sitting next to each other and still playfully arguing. Later, when Liu Pingguo has given birth, they are standing by a window with a wide gap between them, accentuating their emotional distance. Liu Pingguo would like to move on from what happened, but An Kun cannot forgive and forget – that becomes a huge wedge between them.

Liu Pingguo's both relationships to men hurt her – Lin Dong rapes her, An Kun beats her. It could be summarized that she only has a choice of two evils and at the end of the film, she decides she wants neither – she runs away alone with the baby.



### 3.4 Buddha Mountain

*Buddha Mountain* follows three friends - Nan Feng, Dingbo and their fat friend Fei Zao – who have no plans to take the exams for university and just want to do whatever they feel like. They run away from their home after an incident in a bar and settle down in a shared apartment with an ex-opera singer who has lost her son. They find the landlady's savings and steal the money, but get caught in the end. Basically they are drifters that just live for the moment. *Buddha Mountain* can be seen as a story of youth and rebellion, perhaps a “Chinese *Trainspotting*”. The three friends are wandering between reality and dreams (Wang, 2015).

The confused gender identity theme is present in *Buddha Mountain* too as Nan Feng gets often asked whether or not she is a lesbian. However, in comparison to *Fish & Elephant* where the main character was open about her sexuality, Nan Feng is not. She denies being lesbian, but her friends seem not to believe her. However, Nan Feng is only ever seen with male friends, not any female friends – except for the landlady.

#### 3.4.1 The main character

The main female character in *Buddha Mountain* is Nan Feng. She works in a bar until she accidentally knocks a man unconscious. Nan Feng always hangs out with Ding Bo and a fat male friend Fei Zao. During the film, it seems as if the three of them are inseparable – they go everywhere together. It is hinted in the film that Nan Feng has a crush on Ding Bo. However, it could be that her tomboy-ish personality causes the others to ask whether or not she is lesbian.

#### 3.4.2 The main character's relationship with women

Nan Feng becomes very close to their landlady. When she cannot sleep at night, she crawls to the landlady's bed. Nan Feng crawling to landlady's bed at night is a little similar to how a small child would crawl into her mother's bed after having a nightmare. Their relationship seems similar to a mother-daughter relationship. Nan Feng has a bad relationship with her real mother; they only talk on the phone and even then just argue.

Some might see Nan Feng and landlady's relationship as a lesbian one since they are not related by blood. However, it is more alike a mother-daughter relationship because Nan Feng is attracted to Ding Bo. Their relationship is interesting because all of Li Yu's female characters have difficult relationships with their own mothers. Their relationship is reminiscent of a mother-daughter relationship that works, just that they happen not to be actually a mother and a daughter.

### **3.4.3 The main character's relationship with men**

Nan Feng is close friends with Ding Bo and Fei Zao. Nan Feng spends all of her time with the two men, they take the train together and live together with the landlady. There is no mention of her other possible relationships with males, such as her father. The three know each other's secrets and are very close friends.

Nan Feng is ready to fight to revenge the bullying of her fat friend; she breaks a bottle and hits the bully in the head with it. She is fierce when it comes to protecting herself or her best friends; she does not let anyone bully them. Her aggressive behavior is not very ladylike, but that is not surprising as she is truly a tomboy.

The two males are the closest thing Nan Feng has to a family. She does not miss her own family, because she has replaced them with Ding Bo and Fei Zao. Her relationship with them is brotherly, although she has some feelings for Ding Bo. Nan Feng is a strong character, and she scares men, and they cannot see her as a woman, but rather as 'one of the guys'.

Nan Feng has a crush on Ding Bo, and she runs away when she sees him kissing another girl in the bar. She messages him that she will be gone for good, however, after spending some time back home with her mother and drunk stepfather, she returns to the apartment. Later when they are on the train tracks, she confronts him about why he does not take an interest in her.

Nan Feng: Why can you be with other girls, but not with me?

Ding Bo: When my mother was still alive, she was very pretty. My father would spy on her all the time. The more capable she was, the less confident my father became. He would abuse her, drink like hell and destroy things. I

have always felt that only after a man owns a lot of things, can he have the woman he loves. But I have never understood the meaning of “lots of things”.

Nan Feng: Even though you have nothing, you can still have the one you love.

Ding Bo: You are not a man, you cannot understand.

Nan Feng: You are not a woman either.

Nan Feng cannot understand Ding Bo's logic for having to own many things. However, in China, it is common for a man to need to own a house and a car in order to get married. Ding Bo does not want a serious relationship yet, he still wants to play – and Nan Feng is too good a friend to him, he does not want to hurt her.

### **3.5 Double Xposure**

*Double Xposure* (2012) can be seen as an exploration of how the human mind copes with trauma. The cinematic techniques are used as “*cinematic mind style indicators*” (Montoro, 2011, p.81) to show what the main character experiences. Many of these techniques are cinematography and editing related, such as camera angles, composition, changes in light and color, rhythm, but not limited to these. The cinematography mimics psychosis. There are also other techniques such as the use of an orange scarf as the motive element and color symbolism. The main character Song Qi is reminded of her best friend by the color orange – Song Qi's color scheme is blue, the complete opposite of her best friend, Xiaoxi. The colors are used to accentuate the conflict between the two friends who are in love with the same man.

#### **3.5.1 The main character**

The main character of *Double Xposure* is Song Qi (Fan Bingbing) who works in a plastic surgery clinic as an assistant. Her boyfriend, Liu Dong (Feng Shaofeng) is a plastic surgeon in the same hospital, and their relationship has to be kept secret at work. Song Qi's best friend is Xiaoxi (Huo Siyan) who spends her days partying and meeting with lovers while her husband is away on business trips. Song Qi has given Xiaoxi an orange scarf as a present which she discovers in her boyfriend's car realizing the two of them have been seeing each other behind her back. Enraged, Song Qi confronts Xiaoxi about the affair and is stunned by her arrogant reaction –

the confrontation escalates to the point where Song Qi strangles Xiaoxi using the same orange scarf and buries her body outside the front door of Xiaoxi's house.

### **3.5.2 The main character's relationship with women**

In *Double Exposure* (2012) the main female character Song Qi has a complicated relationship with women. The most important women in her life are her mother and her best friend, Xiaoxi. Both of these women end up dead: Song Qi witnessed the murder of her mother and lost her memory as a result of serious trauma, Song Qi murdered her best friend, Xiaoxi. After Xiaoxi's death, Song Qi felt haunted by what she had done and kept seeing Xiaoxi in flashes and dreams. Song Qi wanted to divert the detective's attention away from herself and created a Xiaoxi lookalike from one of her plastic surgery patients. Xiaoxi's looks were regained, but the person inside was of course not Xiaoxi, just a victim of Song Qi's scheme. The desire to resurrect both her mother and Xiaoxi break the psyche of Song Qi – and after the breakdown, she regains all her memories.

### **3.5.3 The main character's relationship with men**

From a female perspective, Song Qi's relationship with her boyfriend Liu Dong seems very loving at first, but quickly her boyfriend begins showing narcissist behavior – he turns from hot to cold and back with seemingly no reason, he has no guilt over cheating on Song Qi with her best friend, Xiaoxi. The emotional violence from Liu Dong is too much for Song Qi to cope with that causes her to break.

Song Qi's previous trauma with her own father has left her craving to feel loved. Her father had come home one night after a business trip and surprised Song Qi's mother Wang Meiling with their lawyer Liu Jian, lost his temper and strangled Song Qi's mother with an orange scarf.

In her imagination, Song Qi takes care of her paraplegic father – but in reality, she has created an illusion in her mind. In reality, her biological father and stepfather Liu Jian both died in a tragic car accident in Xinjiang – the loss of both fathers caused her to begin have hallucinations as part of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The tragic events around her mother's murder became confused in Song Qi's mind and caused her to think that she had murdered Xiaoxi in a jealous fit, but actually she was

in a confused state of mind. Xiaoxi traveled abroad and is alive; the murder was all in Song Qi's head – it did not happen in reality.

### 3.6 Ever Since We Love

*Ever Since We Love* is an exploration of the older woman and younger man (姐弟恋 jiedilian) phenomenon. Not many films have taken the forbidden love of an older woman and a younger man as their topic since it is still a rather sensitive subject. However, in the popular youth culture, the phenomenon has become increasingly romanticized as many believe a younger man will cherish the older woman like a puppy is attached to its master. The film is adapted to the screen from the novel *Everything goes* by Feng Tan (mentioned in the opening titles of the film).

Bai (2015) sees the film as having a *double gaze*, meaning that it has both the *female gaze* and the *male gaze*. The film can indeed be understood as having a *double gaze* since the point of view is changed between the female protagonist Liu Qing and the male protagonist Qiu Shui. There are clearly both gazes in *Ever Since We Love*. However, it is not the first film from Li Yu that has both – *Lost in Beijing* also had some parts with a *double gaze* as the story was told partly from the husband An Kun's perspective and partly from Liu Pingguo's perspective. In *Dam Street*, there were also parts told from the little boy's perspective. Thus, *Dam Street* also had both female and male gaze. However, *Ever Since We Love* is a distinct example of the double gaze in comparison to the others.

#### 3.6.1 The main character

The main female character in *Ever Since We Love* is Liu Qing (柳青). She falls in love with Qiu Shui (秋水), a young medical student who already has a girlfriend, Bai Lu (白露). Liu Qing is already in her thirties and much older than Qiu Shui. Their forbidden love is best kept as a secret. Liu Qing supports herself by dating affluent older men such as government officials. She feels that she is too rotten to be with Qiu Shui who still has a brilliant future ahead of him – and that is why she runs away in the end.

### **3.6.2 The main character's relationship with women**

Liu Qing does not seem to have any relationships with other women in the film. The only woman she meets is Qiu Shui's furious girlfriend Bai Lu who pays them a surprise visit to Liu Qing's apartment. Liu Qing is very calm during the whole encounter and does not really seem even a little surprised Qiu Shui's girlfriend showed up.

Bai Lu asks Liu Qing to take them two back to the university campus by car. In the car, she continues her rude behavior by asking whether she should call Liu Qing "big sister" or "auntie". Bai Lu kisses Qiu Shui by force in the back seat and annoys Liu Qing who brakes the car, causing Bai Lu to stop kissing Qiu Shui. When Bai Lu wants to get out, she screams "stop the car" and leaves by saying "thanks auntie".

### **3.6.3 The main character's relationship with men**

When Liu Qing first meets Qiu Shui, they are both sitting in a hotel lobby alone. Liu Qing approaches him after a foreigner talked to her. Qiu Shui asks what did the foreigner say, and she replies he asked if the money is paid before or after. Qiu Shui is insulted by the question, but Liu Qing explains there is nothing weird about being asked that since she is a young woman sitting alone in a hotel lobby. At this time the audience and Qiu Shui still do not know that she genuinely supports herself by prostituting. Men are a source of income to Liu Qing, except Qiu Shui – what they have is genuine.

## **3.7 Comparisons between the six feature films**

The six feature films were completed during a fourteen year period, from 2001-2015. This period is long enough to see changes from the first to the sixth film. The theme of forbidden or secret love continues throughout. In *Fish & Elephant*, the main character suffers because her lovers want to stay in the closet while she is out. In *Ever Since We Love*, the age gap between the lovers makes their relationship frowned upon if they were publicly open about their relationship.

Unwanted pregnancy is another recurring topic. In *Dam Street*, the main character gets accidentally pregnant while still in school. In *Lost in Beijing*, the main character gets pregnant because of rape. In *Ever Since We Love*, Qiu Shui has unprotected sex

with his girlfriend, after which she suspects she got pregnant. In *Ever Since We Love*, Liu Qing tells Qiu Shui about her married lover and suspects she might be pregnant after a drunken night.

The female main characters have complicated mother-daughter relationships, such as in *Fish & Elephant*, *Dam Street*, and *Buddha Mountain*. The friendship between females is also complex, for example in *Double Xposure* with Song Qi and Xiaoxi both are in love with the same man. What the five first films have in common is that the main female character has at least one female-female relationship. In the newest film *Ever Since We Love* there is no such relationship. The story is more focused on the male main character and his male friends, instead of Liu Qing and her friends.

The underlying assumption with the formulation of the original hypothesis of this study was that the number and composition of different types of shots would be reflected in Li Yu's films transition from underground towards the mainstream. The transition can be assumed from the '*cleaning up the screen*' which has been officially formulated policy to control cinema content (Bai, 2014). The data for this analysis is depicted in more detail below (Table 1).

The data in Table 1 portrays that there are more scenes with females and more individual shots of females in the first five films. There is a growing pattern for the single male, and 2 or more males shots from *Fish & Elephant* to *Ever Since We Love*. This is in line with the original hypothesis that the number of male shots would increase from underground towards the mainstream. *Lost in Beijing* has almost equal amount of only one female and only one male shots. What was unexpected was that the number of female shots also grew over time: *Double Xposure* has the record amount of only one female shot of all the six films. However, in *Ever Since We Love*, the amount of scenes with females has significantly decreased, and the number of males increased drastically. The protagonist was male for the first time in *Ever Since We Love* which may explain the sudden increase in male shots.

TABLE 1						
Movie/shots in different categories	Fish & Elephant	Dam Street	Lost in Beijing	Buddha Mountain	Double Xposure	Ever Since We Love
Only 1 female	51	43	56	107	306	53
Only 1 male	11	32	57	43	35	128
2 or more females	35	23	20	15	57	4
2 or more males	6	9	26	27	0	117
1 male + 1 female	23	40	63	75	122	202
1 female + 2 or more males	8	4	9	62	6	23
Several males and females	23	40	41	72	29	84

Table 1: The number of shots in different categories in Li Yu's six movies.

### 3.7.1 The archetype of the unconventional contemporary Chinese woman

All of Li Yu's female characters are unconventional; they show a new contemporary Chinese woman. The characters range from lesbian zookeeper to masseuse and high-class escort. They show the dark side of the Chinese society and are not usually seen on the big screen which makes them attractive to analyze.

What Li Yu's female characters have in common is that they are corporally punished for their sexuality (Cui, 2011). In *Dam Street*, the main character gets beaten by her mother after she finds out about her pregnancy and years later gets beaten by her lover's wife and friends in public. In *Fish & Elephant*, the main character has to hide



to avoid beating from her girlfriend's boyfriend. In *Ever Since We Love*, Liu Qing gets insulted by Qiu Shui's girlfriend.

Li Yu's female characters are victims of the system, they lack security and protection and are in fragile situations. They resort to using their body to advance in life. The main character in *Dam Street* suffers from her bad reputation even ten years later. A woman's honor is extremely valued by the society, and Li Yu's female characters lack it – thus end up suffering.

However, even if the situation is what it is, Li Yu's female characters are confident and speak their mind. The main character in *Fish & Elephant* lets everyone know she is a lesbian; she does not care about saving "face". In *Buddha Mountain*, Nan Feng makes a mistake when she knocks out a customer, but she does not feel sorry about it at all. In *Ever Since We Love*, Liu Qing is not intimidated when she is confused for a prostitute in the hotel lobby – she is comfortable with who she is.

Li Yu's female characters have either an absent or an abusive father or stepfather – this has been noted before (Duan, 2011; Tian, 2014). In *Buddha Mountain*, Nan Feng has an abusive, alcoholic stepfather. In *Fish & Elephant*, Qun's ex-girlfriend Wu Junjun killed her father who had raped her when she was little. In *Fish & Elephant*, the protagonist's mother is a single mother. In *Double Xposure*, Song Qi's father strangled her mother with an orange scarf, traumatizing Song Qi who witnessed the murder. In *Dam Street*, Yun's father had died when she was still very young.

Li Yu's female characters tend to have complex mother-child relationships (Duan, 2011). In *Dam Street*, Yun has a son without knowing of his existence. Yun also has a strained relationship with her mother who has kept the son's adoption secret for so many years – the mother feels embarrassed about Yun. In *Fish & Elephant*, Qun's mother forces her to go on blind dates with several husband candidates, completely ignoring the fact that she is lesbian. In *Buddha Mountain*, Nan Feng longs for motherly love. However her relationship with her biological mother is not great – they always argue on the phone, Nan Feng continues trying to convince her mother to leave the drunkard stepfather.

Li Yu's female characters typically have one close female friend, but they do not mingle in large female groups. The main protagonist has at least one relationship

with another male than her father. In *Buddha Mountain* Nan Feng has two close male friends and a close relationship with their landlady. In the other films, the relationship with another male can be with the female protagonist's cousin (*Fish&Elephant*), brother (*Double Xposure*) or lover (*Dam Street*). The female protagonists' relationships are summarized in Figure 1.

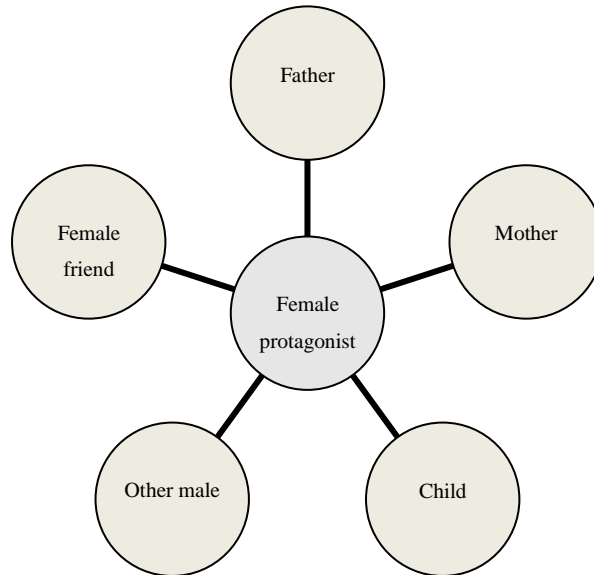


Figure 1: A summary of the characters' relationships.

## 4 From underground to the mainstream

The Sixth Generation has focused on characters that are living on the margins of society, such as gays and lesbians, migrant workers, prostitutes and so forth. The subjects have been in the underground until they have made it to the mainstream as time has passed. Li Yu's earlier films were considered inappropriate by censors. However, they were welcomed by the film festival circuit - *Fish & Elephant* won the Elvira Notari Award in the Venice International Film Festival and was part of the Official Selection at the Vienna Film Festival.

### 4.1 The emergence of middle-class milieus and characters

Chinese Independent Cinema has portrayed marginality since the 1990s. There is a noticeable change in cinematic space from the first film to the sixth film. In *Fish & Elephant* (2001) the events take place in a working-class setting in Beijing – the

locations include the zoo, public park, restaurants, streets, underground shopping bazaar, and private home. In *Dam Street* (2005) the film shot set in a small rural village, presumably somewhere in Sichuan, and all the locations are within the village – theatre, private homes, streets, school, and the dam. *Lost in Beijing* (2007) sees a move from the provinces back to the capital – the setting is that of two migrant workers and the locations include a massage parlor, small room for the migrant worker couple, luxurious city apartment of the parlor’s owner and his wife – the contrast between lower class, and upper-class lifestyles is accentuated.

After *Lost in Beijing*, *Buddha Mountain* (2010) is a shift back towards South Western China, with dusty roads, mountains and train tracks reminiscent of Guizhou. *Double Xposure* (2012) is a combination of the East and West China as some locations are in Xinjiang and others in Qinghuangdao. The locations are plastic surgery hospital, new cars, upper-middle-class hutong home, and city apartment. In *Ever Since We Love* (2015) the change in milieu is very different as the characters are university students studying medicine – the locations include a university campus, laboratory, upscale hotel, and middle-class homes. The differences in wealth are more evident as compared to the earlier films, and generally, the environment is very clean.

The changes from 2001 to 2015 must be related to China’s economic development, including the emergence of the middle class. Many of the people who could identify with the female characters in the undeveloped countryside no longer struggle the same way as they might have used to. Especially for women in China, looks can be a way to escape poverty – which has led to an explosion in plastic surgery. Plastic surgery has in a way become a symbol for the new middle class and including the topic of plastic surgery into a film means that the film has more contemporary appeal to young Chinese female audiences.

Table 2 presents a condensed summary of the main characteristics of the six Li Yu’s feature films. The themes and features of each film have been presented in chapter 3. The summary assists our discussion of these findings in this and sub-sequent sub-chapters.

TABLE 2						
	<b>Fish&amp; Elephant 2001</b>	<b>Dam Street 2005</b>	<b>Lost in Beijing 2007</b>	<b>Buddha Mountain 2010</b>	<b>Double Xposure 2012</b>	<b>Ever Since We Love 2015</b>
<b>Theme</b>	Lesbian love	Love without future	Exploited migrant workers	Youth and rebellion	Trauma	Forbidden love
<b>Main character</b>	Qun	Yun	Liu Pingguo	Nan Feng	Song Qi	Liu Qing
<b>Environment</b>	working-class, Beijing	rural village, Sichuan	massage parlor, Beijing	rural bar, Guizhou	upper class, plastic surgery, Xinjiang, Qinghuang dao	medical university, large city
<b>Language</b>	regional dialect	regional dialect	regional dialect/ Putonghua	Putonghua	Putonghua	Putonghua
<b>Lead actress</b>	Yi Pan	Li Kechun	Fan Bingbing	Fan Bingbing	Fan Bingbing	Fan Bingbing
<b>Forbidden or secret love</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Extramarital affair</b>		X	X		X	X
<b>Unwanted pregnancy</b>		X	X			X
<b>Complicated mother-daughter relationship</b>	X	X		X		
<b>Female-Female relationship</b>	X	X	X	X	X	
<b>Corporal punishment</b>	X	X	X			X
<b>Strong character</b>	X			X		X
<b>Abusive/absent father</b>	X	X		X	X	

Table 2: A condensed summary of the main characteristics of the Li Yu's six feature films.

## 4.2 From speaking dialect to speaking Putonghua

In the earlier films, the characters spoke dialects, which emphasized the regionality. Using dialect, however, limits the scope of distribution – as it is required to speak Mandarin Putonghua in films that get an official release. Films with dialects will have only limited release. In the officially approved *Double Xposure* and *Ever Since We Love* the characters speak the standard Putonghua. The change in the language directly correlates with the growth in audience.

More viewers will be interested in watching the films when they do not need to read subtitles. When the films are spoken in dialect, the subtitles are a must or else the

audience will have a hard time following the film as Chinese dialects differ greatly especially between North and South, and East and West.

### **4.3 The influence of film financing on the characters**

The budgets of Li Yu's feature films are more interesting as there is a pronounced rise. In both *Fish and Elephant* (2001) and *Dam Street* (2005) the image quality is more reminiscent of documentaries and the actors are non-professional – the latter is emphasized in the end titles of the film. *Lost in Beijing* was the first film with professional actors.

Fan Bingbing is generally seen in other directors' films as the "beautiful girl". Li Yu brought a completely another side to her in *Lost in Beijing* (2007) and *Buddha Mountain* (2010) with messy hair and no makeup and took her to milieus she was never seen before – massage parlors and coal trains. However, the introduction of Fan Bingbing meant a growing interest in Li Yu's films as many of the public, especially superfans, want to see all the films she stars in. Thus, the general environment of the '*cleaning up the screen*' created an increasing pressure on the director Li Yu to modify her stories and characters to pass the censorship.

### **4.4 What has remained the same and what has changed about the characters?**

Li Yu's female characters are independent, often very headstrong women. In almost all of the films, the main female character has a complex relationship with the mother. The mother is shown as controlling and kept at a distance - many of the conversations between mother and daughter are made only through the phone for example in both *Fish & Elephant* and *Buddha Mountain*.

The father is mostly absent – in most of the films the main character had been brought up by her mother, and the cause for his absence is death by a car accident (*Double Xposure*). If the father is around, he is abusive – such as Wu Junjun's father in *Fish & Elephant* or Nan Feng's stepfather in *Buddha Mountain*. The female characters have no sisters, and usually only one brother – who is usually dead from a car accident (*Fish & Elephant*) – or a stepbrother who she has been in love with since childhood (*Double Xposure*).

In the two latest films that were shown in cinemas, *Double Xposure* (2012) and *Ever Since We Love* (2015), the women have turned more active. In the earlier films, the main female characters accepted their bad treatment and were more prone to the victim mentality. In *Double Xposure* (2012) Song Qi is shown having a violent side, which was new. In *Ever Since We Love* (2015), Liu Qing is shown as actively seducing Qiu Shui - for the first time in Li Yu's films a woman is seen as the more dominant one in the male-female balance of power.

Li Yu's female characters have difficult relationships with men. Two of Li Yu's protagonists are mistresses, Yun in *Dam Street* and Liu Qing in *Ever Since We Love*. The extramarital affairs are a recurring topic ever since *Dam Street*, as they are also featured in *Lost in Beijing*, *Double Xposure* and *Ever Since We Love*.

The *female gaze* is strongest in the earlier films. However, the fifth film *Double Xposure* has an especially high amount of one female only shots. That was an unexpected result of having counted all the shots in the seven categories: 1) only 1 female, 2) only 1 male, 3) 2 or more females only, 4) 2 or more males only, 5) one male and one female, 6) one female and two or more males, 7) several males and females. The hypothesis was that the number of male shots would increase when moving towards the mainstream. However, even though there are more male shots, the amount of female shots also has increased due to the change in cinematography. The *male gaze* is introduced in *Dam Street* with the little boy admiring Yun taking a shower. However, it is not until *Ever Since We Love* that there is a clear *double gaze* – both male and female gaze.

If this thesis had been using psychoanalysis only, the change in individual shots would have remained unnoticed. Using telecinematic discourse analysis provided a way to analyze relationships between characters through talk and gestures, and *mind style*. Analyzing conversations and gestures can help in understanding the relationships between characters, and for example, to identify friendships. The scenes were analyzed by *mind style*, which assisted in understanding the characters' state of mind.

#### 4.5 Changing society – Changing representations

The Chinese society has changed a lot since 1997 the decriminalization of homosexuality and 2001 when homosexuality was removed from the list of mental illnesses (Chang & Ren, 2017). However, the culture of silence has continued, meaning that films and TV shows with gay or lesbian protagonists are prohibited. There have been some changes since the androgynous Li Yuchun won the singing contest "Super Girl" (Hui, 2012).

The Chinese society has become more acceptant of the tomboyish girls in media, and there are more and more of these tomboyish girls portrayed in films and television. However, even so, they cannot be openly lesbian still. Their orientation can be hinted, but not spoken out loud like Qun in *Fish & Elephant* does.

Li Yu's female characters are still considered pretty hardcore when compared with the Chinese mainstream films representation of women. Li Yu's female characters do not shy away from trouble. It is refreshing to see this kind of alternative representation of women in films.

#### 4.6 Concluding remarks

The research questions of this thesis were:

1. How are the main female characters portrayed in Li Yu's feature films?
2. How are the relationships between the main female characters and other male and female characters in the films?
3. Do these representations change over time? If so, how and why?

To answer these questions, the selected set of data consisted of six films *Fish & Elephant* (2001), *Dam Street* (2005), *Lost in Beijing* (2007), *Buddha Mountain* (2010), *Double Xposure* (2012), *Ever Since We Love* (2015) and applicable literature.

The research method was based on theoretical framework by Metz & Mulvey that was complemented by Cao's role categories for women. This framework alone would not have been sufficient for the purposes of this thesis. Therefore, telecinematic discourse analysis and 'mind style' as developed by Montoro were applied. Furthermore, the detailed data analysis was also conducted according to

Bubel as depicted in Table 1. These complementary methods provided insights that could not have been noticed otherwise such as the rising trend of female characters' visibility.

The validity of research method and the potential for cultural bias was addressed in chapters 2.2 and 2.4 respectively. Based on the findings and interpretations in this thesis, the method is considered valid and potential for cultural bias has been considered and minimized, although cannot be completely disregarded.

The main female characters of Li Yu's films are portrayed as independent and strong-willed. They struggle in their daily lives as they are living in the margins of society. Li Yu's female characters are modern, unconventional and easily find themselves in conflicts with the more traditional characters, such as their mothers.

The relationships between main female characters and other male and female characters are complicated. The main female characters tend to have bad relationships with other women, especially their mothers. Mothers usually do not understand their daughters, and there are constant clashes between the mothers and daughters. Typically, the main female character has one trusted female friend – such as Xiaomei in *Lost in Beijing* or Xiaoxi in *Double Xposure*.

These representations change over time as the Chinese society becomes wealthier – the characters begin to live in more middle-class milieus and speak standard Chinese (Putonghua). Starting from *Double Xposure*, the characters are more focused on how they look, because of the societal pressures. The professions of the characters change from masseuse to plastic surgery nurse, and the males are doctors in the last two films that are considered mainstream.

It is clear that as time passes, the society changes and so do the representations. Li Yu's female characters show that change too, with the change from poverty into more middle-class milieus. The society has become wealthier, and the issues have changed; in *Buddha Mountain*, the three worried about money, in *Double Xposure*, they worry about their looks. If there were more films by Li Yu to come, the female characters would change again.



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